

Jesus Christ and Prayer

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IN a very true sense these two realities, Jesus and Prayer, define sufficiently for us the fact of Christianity. Jesus is the secret of the Christian religion as a self-accrediting message of Divine grace to the sinful, and Prayer is the vital function of the faith which that message has evoked. In the personality of Christ we are confronted by the great historic Fact in which we behold the index of the Father, as faithfully and unchangeably Redeemer; Prayer, on the other hand, when offered in the light of Jesus, is the all-decisive inward fact, the distinct attitude of human souls, which indicates how far Jesus' revelation has achieved its purpose. He who knows what Jesus and Prayer mean, knows Christianity.

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The Christian mind has never been able to avoid a twofold, or alternating, estimate of Jesus,

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neither aspect of which it will ever be possible to reduce entirely to terms of the other. In the incipient theology of Asia Minor, and even earlier, in the religious thought of the New Testament, there is discernible a tendency to interpret Christ in two ways which are both true at once: *κατὰ πνεῦμα* and *κατὰ σαρκά*. Or to put it otherwise, in more modern and perhaps more technical language, Jesus has invariably been regarded on the one hand as a revelation of God—a Human Life in whom the Father is perfectly presented—a revelation that appeals for faith, demands the obedience of worship, and in that character is somehow over-against us, as God Himself is. Faith looks outward to Him and directs upon Him its whole power of apprehension, because it finds in Him all that can be called salvation; in this general and naïve sense He has been, always and for every Christian mind, on the Divine side of reality. At present we are not concerned with the varied expression which this fundamental conviction has assumed in the Christological affirmations of the Creeds. These are, and must be, subject to the freely revising power of later generations, of the living Church.

But, on the other hand, Jesus has simultaneously and with equal universality been interpreted as our Brother, in life and death, our Example and Forerunner in obedient faith—one of ourselves in the deepest sense, with a religious life of His own, for which He is responsible and which forms the core of His personal being. It is notorious that if this aspect of

the question has suffered undue neglect in ecclesiastical Christology, the fault does not lie with the New Testament. Not to speak of the Synoptic Gospels, the Epistle to the Hebrews in particular contains daring but veracious words concerning the piety of Jesus, His communion with the Father, His experience of temptation, His prayers and supplications “offered up with strong crying and tears.” So that “Jesus Christ and Prayer” is a topic drawn straight out of the facts. Jesus the Believer is as real as Jesus the Revealer.

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We cannot, however, contemplate these two aspects of the whole Fact of Christ—His manifestation of God and His communion with God—without perceiving at once that they are vitally related to each other. They are not conjoined by accident. It might indeed be asked whether in scope and meaning they are not precisely co-terminous; whether, that is to say, our proper ground of faith in God is not just Christ’s faith in God—this, and nothing else. Have we any other ultimate and sufficient reason for making an essential connexion between our faith in the living God and the personality of Jesus than this, that Jesus first exhibits what faith in the living God can be? Is Jesus’ trust the last ground of our trust? Put in this way, the question is not one which I myself could answer in the affirmative, for this reason. It must not be forgotten that, in addition to His religious life, Jesus had a history, a career, and into this career there entered facts or experiences of supreme and permanent revealing significance—the

Resurrection, for example—which cannot be accurately described as mere elements of His inner life; they happened to Him. But these two, the subjective and the objective—to use a perhaps overwrought and many-coloured, distinction—cannot be separated without a false abstraction which distorts the given data. They are presented to us, in the pages of the New Testament, as a living whole, as forming the reality which we know as “Jesus.” But though personally I should feel this difficulty about reducing everything that reveals God to Jesus’ faith and prayer, I should yet contend emphatically that

34 the two, the inward life and the career, are strictly organic to each other and are intelligible only as one casts light upon the other. In the weighty words of Thomas Erskine: “A son may reveal a father in two ways: either by being like him—so entirely in his image as to be justified in saying, He that hath seen me hath seen my father—or by manifesting a constant reverential, loving trust, and thus testifying that the father is, worthy of such a trust. Jesus revealed the Father in both these ways.” He not only stood with God over against men; just as truly He stood with men over against God. And our present interest is to mark that, except for His loving, reverential trust, the revelation of the Father would not have been imparted in moral ways, and could not have been morally appreciated. Revelation, if it is to be more than a verbal, theoretic declaration, must come through an absolute reflection of the Father, caught by and flung out from a perfect soul,

in whose depths men should read and love it. That reflection is given specially in Jesus as He prays. There we look into His soul, and find the Father's face mirrored in its depths. His prayer is His faith in movement.

An exhaustive treatment of the theme is not possible here, but we may I think signalise the chief points of interest and moment by considering first Jesus' practice of prayer; next, the convictions underlying His prayer-life; and finally (and more briefly), the tendency which Christians have often shown to pray directly to Jesus. Throughout we shall take the Christological point of view—that is, we shall ask under each head what light is flung upon the personality of Christ, as manifesting the Father.

(1) Jesus' practice of prayer. In this field, as elsewhere, the believer is intuitively aware of both things—Christ's unity with men and His difference from them.

(a) In prayer Jesus is one with us. Towards His Father, it is evident; He felt the same religious awe and humility that befit men; He prayed as we do, and, again like us in our sincere hours, He prayed because of a felt necessity to pray. He bowed reverently before the incomparable majesty of God, bowed with a holy fear that would not use familiarity overmuch. We are accustomed to speak of Jesus as our Pattern, but that great conception we spoil, by vulgarising its appeal, when we permit ourselves to suppose, even though it be half-consciously,

that His motive at any point was to furnish an example. Precisely in this matter of prayer, it was His unconscious influence that went deepest. It was when the disciples found Him praying in a certain place that they came with the request: "Lord, teach us to pray." They were moved to the depths by the perception that with Him prayer was engaged in for its own sake, or rather for God's sake. Our Lord's prayer-life is indeed exemplary, but it cannot be too emphatically said that no act is exemplary which is not first of all dutiful and spontaneous. Thus we lay it down as our basal assumption that Jesus prayed in virtue of an inward compulsion, of an irrepressible desire for that communion without which He could not have continued to live.

Christology has fallen into difficulties here—into puzzles, I fear we must say, largely of its own making. Christ on His knees has been felt as disconcerting. Men who occupied the standpoint of a speculative Trinitarianism naturally found it hard to explain how Christ, the Second Person of the Godhead, could pray at all, or how, if He did pray, He could escape praying implicitly to Himself, since His Divine nature, in common with the Father and the Spirit, is being addressed by His manhood. We avoid these enigmas by starting from the Gospel picture. Some questions are unanswerable because they ought never to be asked. We cannot make

36 Christ too human, if His life remains for us a transparent medium of Divine grace. He kept Himself in the love of God by the only method and through the

only experience available for a moral personality, namely, through fellowship and obedience; or, as we may otherwise express it, through that steadfastly maintained attitude of adoration and receptiveness for which our ordinary name is Prayer. (Prayer, however, not regarded as a movement of spirit ending within itself, but as taking shape in action devoted to the Kingdom of God.) Apart from this uninterrupted vision of the Father, this perpetual acceptance of life at the Father's hands, the activity even of Jesus, however morally noble and aspiring, would religiously have been fruitless.

We cannot now pursue this thought into the details of Jesus' recorded prayers. Suffice it that alike in His more protracted periods of communion and in brief gusts of petition wrung from Him by the exacting needs of ministry, His struggle in the Garden, and the last dark hours on the Cross, He invariably prays under the stress of need. But that need must not be construed in terms of utility. Prayer was not for Jesus a weapon in the struggle for existence. It was no necessary evil, borne resignedly, but the joy and rejoicing of His heart. It was the Son's need to keep unbroken touch with the Father. Nothing brings Him nearer to us than this. As we listen to His prayers, there comes home to us overpoweringly a sense of His experiential oneness with all who have cried to God because God alone was the strength of their heart and their portion for ever.

(b) But there is also a distinction between His prayers and ours, and for religion the distinction

is as arresting and significant as the identity. The quality of prayer varies with the man. It varies likewise with the vision of God by which it has been evoked and in which it seeks complete satisfaction.

37 It therefore seems to me mere fidelity to the historic record to affirm that Christ's prayers somehow differed from ours inasmuch as they originated in a uniquely filial consciousness of God which we have good reason to believe dated from early years. They flowed from this filial consciousness, and in turn they nourished it. It is unnecessary, on the whole to raise at this point the familiar problem whether the conscious relation of Jesus to the Father was distinct in type from that into which other believers enter, or only distinct in degree. For the contrast of kind and degree is not as helpful as it sounds. If Jesus lived in perfect fellowship with God, while our fellowship is broken and sin-stained, then the difference is one of quality, not quantity, and it is obscured and belittled when terms are used which suggest that Jesus is simply further advanced on the same path by which we are travelling. On the other hand, to speak of a difference of kind is equally misleading, for the fellowship with God He enjoyed unbrokenly is a fellowship into which He bids us follow Him. But a difference of *quality* is obvious. It is indicated clearly, for example, in the extraordinary passage with which the 11th chapter of St. Matthew concludes—that Johannine inset in the Synoptics, as it may be called: "No one knows the Son except the Father; nor does any one know

the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." These words of overheard soliloquy confirm the impression we gain elsewhere that Jesus had long realised the fact that no one else had a consciousness of, and trust in, the Father at all approaching His own. What is more, this conviction on Jesus' part has been endorsed by the Christian mind from the beginning, in this decisive sense that no Christian has ever professed to have the same consciousness of God as Jesus—a, consciousness exhibiting the same intimacy, insight or reciprocity. To repeat His sense of God we should have to *be* Jesus over again. But it was from this uniquely qualified consciousness that all His prayers took their rise; to this they gave living expression; by means of such prayer this singular consciousness of the Father was maintained and perpetuated. Hence we cannot ignore the distinction of Jesus' prayers from ours; prayer, like every moral act, is only as the agent is. It is in reality the same point which many writers have emphasised by calling attention to the absence of penitence from Jesus' devotional language. And the question whether Jesus felt guilty or unworthy in the Father's presence is, one feels, already decided by the fact that it could become a subject of dispute. Unless in this reference He were not only separate from sinners, but distinct from the saints, His awareness of sin would assuredly have been expressed, not in uncertain whispers, but in piercing and overwhelming sorrow; we should not have been suffered to remain in doubt whether

He was or was not a penitent. Had Jesus possessed experimental knowledge of moral evil, through a bad conscience, we should have known it without fail; or rather we should not have known it, for His name would have perished, and Christian religion would have had no existence.

Jesus was the first in all history to pray thus. Never before had there risen up to God the prayer of perfect sonship; and if, as I have explained, there is a true sense in which He was not the last to offer this new type of prayer, appropriate to the Kingdom of God, yet He still remains unique in the new order, for all the rest have learnt of Him. Not only so, but no pupil has equalled the Master. Thus unity and difference, as between Jesus and ourselves, persists to the end. It is only by virtue of His unapproachable pre-eminence that He creates our derivative and imitative experience of prayer.

39 (2) The convictions which underlie Jesus' prayer-life must now be ascertained. We have to discover Jesus' view of the universe as a whole, in its fundamental and determining characteristics—a world-view partly implicit in His conduct, but also largely explicit in His teaching. Two great thoughts emerge and ask for study.

First, Jesus' conception of Prayer and its significance is but a special aspect of His conception of the Father. Once in a great hour of exaltation He uttered the words: "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth"; and within the limits of that invocation we shall find the thought of God upon which all Je-

sus' teaching on Prayer is built. God is Father; not only so, He is Lord of heaven and earth. Neither side of the great fact must be overlooked. Holy Love, reflected in Jesus' life of sonship, defines for us the sense in which we are to understand "Father"; but Holy Love alone and by itself is not what the Christian means by God; and, what is more important, it is not what Jesus meant. The Father is transcendent, infinite with an infinitude for which nothing is impossible, and as Titius remarks, "One cannot make an unprejudiced examination of the Gospels without being astonished to find how enormously important for Jesus' view of God was His impression of God's omnipotence and infinite sublimity." Far from impairing the Jewish belief on that head, He intensified and deepened it to the uttermost. Nature, in contrast to the Father's power, is nothing. The glorious thought of that Lord of heaven and earth who is never weary, and who takes up the isles as a very little thing—the thought which had dilated the mind of the great prophet of the exile—was thus absolutely purified and proclaimed in what, for the religious consciousness, are final and irreducible terms.

In great measure the modern mind has lost the key to this. The world of matter and its laws has separated us from the Father; we are caged and confined by rigidities of uniformity, and men look out through the bars—not seldom men who love prayer—and talk as though it were happier to be inside the cage than outside. It is occasionally suggested that Jesus thought as He did only because

“He was still untouched by our modern knowledge according to which the whole course of nature is controlled by calculable laws.” It is assumed that modern conceptions, had He been aware of them, would have changed His faith. But this is unbelievable. What was primary with Jesus was not a world-view, which is perpetually liable to revision, but assurance of the living God, which can never change. Alike in life and prayer He was free in soul, and He was free precisely because of His unshaken certainty that God is free. As Professor Cairns has said in familiar words, which, have brought light to many minds: “For the first time in history there appeared on earth One who absolutely trusted the Unseen, who had utter confidence that Love was at the heart of all things, utter confidence also in the Absolute Power of that Absolute Love and in the liberty of that Love to help Him.” We speak in the Sense of Jesus, therefore, when we place behind His prayers the conviction of an omnipotent Father freely wielding all that is meant by Nature for the realisation of unspeakably gracious ends; a Father to trust whom renders the notion of the cosmos as a closed system of effects and causes sheerly untenable. This in no sense relieves us of the difficult intellectual problem of how the liberty of God is to be exhibited as reconcilable with the order of the world, a problem, it may well be, which we shall never completely solve. But a man’s deepest convictions are his religious convictions, and at the basis of Jesus’ prayer-life there lies the insight

that the Father's freedom is unhampered, that it is determined exclusively by spiritual principles, and that the constitution of the world is not at variance with its loving sway.

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The second assumption underlying Jesus' practice and thought of Prayer is a new view of Faith. "Have faith in God," He enjoins. Man's distrust of the infinite Father is the one thing which can prevent the bestowal of God's highest gifts. Submissive confidence sets free the almightiness of Divine Love. God finds a joy in responding to childlike trust by releasing into the phenomenal order the pent-up forces of His goodness in answer to a faith that relies on the Unseen, exactly as we rely on the Seen, to behave in uniform modes; and Jesus' express teaching is to the effect that if we thus unreservedly depend on God, things as great and difficult will happen as the removal of mountains. I need not now dwell on spiritual reasons why God can only give us the highest aids when we come with empty hands and expectant trust, why He has here left Himself dependent on our faith as at other points in life He has upon our devoted co-operation. That is a familiar theme. But at all events it is obvious that this great new sense of Faith, which we owe to Jesus, and which has oozed out of the Christian mind equally with His thought of God, has suffered obscuration chiefly by the intellectualistic conception of Faith which overran the Church in the early centuries, virtually equating Faith with the acceptance of orthodox belief.

It may be pointed out here that there is nothing in Jesus' mind at all corresponding to certain sincere but hesitating distinctions which later thought admitted, and which are still widely prevalent. He gives no countenance to the view that Prayer ought to exclude petitionary elements, as but a relic of primitive magic. His thought was this: when we pray, we offer desires to God in the well-grounded belief that thereby some things will happen which would not have happened had we refrained from prayer. Also He prayed for physical alterations of the world no less trustfully than for other kinds; that is the childlike thing to do. Anything else is sophisticated; and in point of fact the philosophy which forbids it is equally fatal to prayer for inward grace. Superstition is completely excluded by the circumstance that in both case, if we follow Jesus, we conclude prayer with an unfailing "Thy will be done."

But to take a step forward—these two fundamental thoughts of Jesus, concerning the Almighty Father and human Faith, do not simply co-exist in otiose juxtaposition. If sin prevails, some kind of mutual exclusion there must be between God and man, except on terms which would construe our experience of sinning as a direct personal experience of God Himself. But if, as in Jesus, sin be absent, and if His prayers are actually the prayers of perfect faith, then instantly the case of Jesus becomes the ideal limit to which our minds ought to ascend from the highest instances of human devotion. It

has rightly been contended by a recent essayist that prayer, everywhere and always, is essentially an act of co-operation with the Spirit of God, and that the prayers of Jesus constitute the point at which the Spirit's operation within the praying mind of man reached its highest expression, so that in and through His petitions the operations of God within went out to meet the operation of God in the world. Thus, if Christ is the one commanding instance of prayer completely equal to its idea, what we are dealing with is but another form or aspect of the truth that in Him there was a special presence of God. If no prayer of Jesus was left unanswered—whatever may have been the case with instantly quelled wishes—this must have resulted from, or been an illustration of, the principle that prayer is invariably effectual, effectual without drawback, when the praying spirit is completely in harmony with God. He who shared God's life was in prayer not merely eliciting but actually expressing God's mind. The Spirit that dwells within us in part dwelt in Him in fullness. One true way of conceiving Christ, accordingly, is to conceive Him as the limiting instance of the immanence of the Spirit of the unseen God, the same Spirit that helps our infirmity when we pray. Here again it is doubtfully illuminating to call this difference blankly one either of kind or degree. But a difference of quality is unmistakable, and one which can never be superseded; for the Spirit's presence in Christ was creative and originaive as contrasted with an experience on our

part which is unconditionally derived. This difference, as we have seen, is strikingly manifest in the field of Prayer. In our thoughts of this whole subject we must never start with ready-made conceptions of what Prayer is: we have in Jesus' prayer a new standard of comparison, as it is through Him that we receive the Spirit that makes possible for us such prayer as His.

Possibly the last thing worth saying under this head is that for Jesus prayer is charged with power to effect real changes. It is meant to have an answer. People who came to Him and would take no denial refreshed His spirit in a wonderful and most significant fashion. The recent flood of fertilising eschatological study ought not to hide from us the fact that in His belief prayer can hasten the coming of the Kingdom; by the touch of faith men can liberate the gracious energies of the Father. God is living and waits to act. How we Protestants need to recover this sense of the present and transcendent activity of the Father, and how profoundly such a rediscovery of the living God would transform our prayers! Dean Church somewhere explains Newman's choice of the Roman communion by the fact that Newman "could not see a trace in English society of that simple and severe hold of the unseen which is the colour and breath, as well as the outward form, of the New Testament life." To go on our knees to what, with a specious simplicity, is misdescribed as the modern view of the world (as if there were only one), tamely to surrender Jesus' thought

of God, His thought of Faith, His thought of Prayer as uniting these two in living and redeeming unity, is a far more definite apostasy from the fundamental truth of the Christian Gospel than heresies against which we are cautioned much more frequently. I am persuaded, however, that it is apostasy which no Christian mind ever commits in innermost conviction, whatever wild and whirling words may be resorted to in technical discussion.

(3) A few concluding words may be added on the subject of Prayer to Christ. We must speak briefly, for here we are no longer treating of the substantialities of history, but rather with what may be designated the natural, and even legitimate though not obligatory, speculation of faith. It must not be supposed, that the practice of addressing Christ in prayer is obsolete, or that it obtains solely in definitely conservative circles. On the contrary, I understand that Professor Martin Rade, a very attractive member of the Ritschlian school, and a thinker of pronouncedly liberal sympathies, not long since declared that nothing would ever induce him to discontinue the custom of praying to Christ directly—a custom, he added, in which faith itself encouraged him. Be his attitude right or wrong, at least there are well-known precedents for it in New Testament religion, while the most cursory glance over ancient and modern Liturgies proves to demonstration that the habit has never been unfamiliar to the Church.

One interpretation of the practice may well be disallowed at the very outset. It is not a valid defence

of prayer to Christ to argue that He is, as it were, one of the glorified saints, pre-eminent it is true, yet not in a class by Himself. In Dr. George Adam Smith's
45 Life of Henry Drummond a correspondent is quoted who testifies that after Drummond's death he sometimes prayed to him. That is a touching fact, intelligible to many, but it is no true parallel to Christian prayer addressed to the Christian's Lord. It lacks the religious presuppositions of the other.

Again, prayer to Christ is clearly wrong if it forms an alternative to, or substitute for, prayer to God. Unquestionably it has often figured thus in the religious life. People have contracted the lamentable habit of regarding Christ as more accessible than the Father, more loving, more easy to be entreated, and they have taken their desires chiefly or exclusively to Him, as others to the Virgin, shirking contact with the supposedly sterner God. But this can have no place in a faith inspired by the New Testament.

Premising that in regard to this form of prayer there exists a curious cross-division of opinion, some conservatives rejecting it, some liberals approving it—I venture to think there are two points of view from which it appears as permissibly Christian, and natural in the best sense. First, the great reality apprehended by faith is God in Christ. Not certainly Christ apart from God, yet quite as certainly not God apart from Christ. "Apart from Christ," said Chalmers, "I find that I have no hold of God at all." The supreme object of confidence, therefore the true object of supplication and communion, is

the Father revealed in the Son. But this reality may be grasped, so to say, from either side; it may be apprehend either in its proximate or its ultimate aspect. It may be seized in that aspect of it which is closer to our minds, the revealing Personality; or again in that aspect which fills and gives meaning to manifested fact, the revealed God. In both cases the reality is the same. And he who prays to Christ will say, not erroneously as I think, that he does no more than name this reality in terms of historic fact. In strictness, when he says Christ, what is in his mind is the God who draws near in Christ, and with whom, in experience, Christ is identified.

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Furthermore, if the conception of the exalted Christ has any place in the believing mind—if it is not a piece of pure mythology—then it is difficult to conceive of the glorified Lord save in forms which virtually identify Him with God and thus make prayer to Him—this time not in view of the historical revelation merely but in face of present certainties—an instinctive movement of adoration. To believe only that Christ was immortal, like other men, but not that He now lives in the fullest possession of blessedness and power, appears to me radically unjust to the implications of faith as that faith has fought and conquered from the beginning until now. This, however, means that if a man prays to Christ, he only does so rightly, as Herrmann puts it, in so far as “at the moment of prayer every difference between the Person of Jesus and the one personal God is done away.”

What has just been said is but a defence of the legitimacy of such prayer in Christian devotion, certain conditions being fulfilled. None will maintain that it is a necessary or vital expression of saving trust. We are learning by degrees that Christian experience admits a variety of religious types, and that these types have each its congenial way of reacting upon the Gospel.

When we contemplate Jesus' thought of Prayer as a whole, under the strong light of His personal religion, we are forced back upon very searching questions about the theology and the Church life of our age. It is clear that we are not utterly believing. We have sunk into a species of Christian naturalism, which in certain cases is prepared to formulate exactly the laws of historical periodicity by which the Kingdom of God goes forward in one age and backward in the next. But this is to be spectators of the great Divine movement, not fellow-labourers in it with God, as we may be through Prayer. It is to breathe an atmosphere far removed from Jesus' conception of God, the All-loving, the All-powerful, the All-free. And it is as we triumphantly and adoringly recapture His thought of the Father that His kindred thought of Prayer will again possess us, and His Church will again be made adequate to the stupendous task of missionary evangelism and social reclamation.